

The Ohio State University
Department of Geography
COLLOQUIUM SERIES 2012-2013

**Following the caterpillar fungus:
Nature, commodity chains, & the place
of Tibet in China's uneven geographies**

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Caterpillar fungus has become the single most important source of income for rural Tibetans in China. Following caterpillar fungus as it travels from the Tibetan plateau to wealthy Chinese consumers, the talk will examine the intersection of political and moral economies along the commodity chain, focusing on the cultural politics of value and how this intersects with inequality in China's uneven geographies of development. In particular, the paper points to the importance of non-human nature in setting barriers to the production of the wild harvest for the market. At the same time, a geographic imaginary of a pristine Tibetan nature, used to sell caterpillar fungus, erases the labor of Tibetan harvesters and constitutes Tibet as a natural resource for a Chinese middle class anxious about health and pollution, maintaining deep-rooted geographical inequalities. A new set of meanings has also emerged to sell caterpillar fungus, centered on the biomolecular nature of its active ingredients, exacerbating the potential for the figurative and literal erasure of Tibetans and their political grievances in contemporary China. Showing how following a small fungus can shed light on the uneven geographies obscured in monolithic narratives of China's rise, the paper demonstrates the value of expanding commodity chain studies beyond those that end with Western consumers.

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